
THE NIGHT THE ANGELS SANG: CHRISTMAS 1914 AT HOME AND ON THE
FRONT

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God heard the embattled nations sing and shout:
'Gott strafe England' – 'God save the King' –
'God this' – 'God that' – and "God the other thing."
'My God,' said God, 'I've got my work cut out.'

—J. C. Squire

It may be argued that nowhere in the world does the sacred religious holiday of Christmas have roots and traditions so deep as those of Western Europe, and within that region, many of the most time-honored Christmas customs originated in Germany and Austria. The season's most well-known and enduring hymn "Silent Night" or "Stille Nacht" was composed by an Austrian priest around 1818, while the Christmas tree itself, typically a fir tree or "Tannenbaum" in German, is said to have originated in Germany in the 16th century. Wartime Britons, perhaps unwilling to credit the source of many of their traditions, noted reluctantly that the tree was "rightly described as the only good thing that ever came out of Germany."¹ Glass ornaments, however, also trace their origin to Germany in the nineteenth century. The holiday customs spread throughout Christian Europe and Britain, where new elements were added to the Germanic standards and Britons developed their own twists to the holiday. Englishman Charles Dickens' 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol* was simultaneously a treatise on social injustice and a captivating tale of redemption that embodied the spirit of the season. His countrymen soon added novelties such as Christmas Crackers, Christmas Pudding, and various other adaptations. By 1914, whether they called it Christmas Eve or Heiliger Abend, Boxing Day or Weihnachtsfeiertag, sang "Silent Night" or "Stille Nacht," most soldiers on the Western Front shared mutual, deeply instilled holiday memories that for the Christians among them revolved around the birth of the Savior and which, for at least a short time, transcended the will to fight.

Early in December 1914, Pope Benedict XV, elected to the Papacy only three months before, fervently sought a temporary silencing of the guns that had shattered Europe since August. Let "them fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang," he urged the warring powers.² Benedict's plea fell on deaf ears, but

informally, the spirit of the season managed to exert its power inexorably upon the already battle weary and homesick combatants. Notwithstanding the official government ruling, it would be up to those who bore the greatest burdens to decide whether a break from the fighting was warranted. Even civilians understood the official position, however. After the day had passed, one London correspondent opined that the idea of a Christmas truce had been “quite impracticable” in the face of hard military realities. The fear that such a respite from the fighting could be “utilized for fresh concentration of forces, or for the preparation of new positions, was too serious a matter to be risked.”³ Nonetheless, in the weeks leading up to the holidays, newspapers were filled with conjecture about a truce. Some eventually blamed the Russians for failing to accept the offer, with speculation that the January date for the Orthodox Church’s celebration of the holiday was the key to their rejection. Others blamed German “duplicity” for poisoning the offer, noting, “[It] would have suited the Germans marvelously well to have accepted the suggestion of a Christmas truce” and to use it in their favor.⁴ A few papers added hope by repeating stories carried in the German press “that Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey assented to the pope’s proposal for a truce.”⁵ Many clergymen supported the pope’s proposal. At London’s City Temple, a non-conformist minister referenced the pontiff’s hopes and described the prospect as “a truce of God.”⁶ In the end, all efforts failed to sway the nations’ leaders, leaving the outcome in the hands of the combatants on the front lines.

As with many wars, the soldiers who had so eagerly harkened to the sound of the trumpets in the late summer of 1914 did so with the typical misguided notion that they would thrash the foe and be home by Christmas. The unrelenting combat that ensued in the first months of the war and turned Europe’s green farmland into a blood-soaked abattoir soon put the lie to such optimism. Germany’s war plans developed by Chief of the German General Staff Count Alfred von Schlieffen in the latter part of the nineteenth century had gotten off to a good start, though. The Schlieffen Plan presumed an immediate French offensive and thus entailed a German holding action at the border. Meanwhile, the main thrust of a German attack would sweep through Holland and Belgium, along the Channel coast and thence eastward through the undefended countryside to Paris, enveloping and trapping the French army. The time required to defeat France was estimated at six to eight weeks. Fortunately for the Allies, Schlieffen’s plan did not survive the manipulations of his more timid successor, Helmuth von Moltke. Nonetheless, for the first month of the war, German forces steadily pushed the Allied armies back toward the Marne River.⁷

The four-day Battle of the Marne that began on September 5 saw nearly 1.4 million German, French, and British soldiers facing one another. When it was over, it was estimated that roughly half a million of those soldiers were wounded or dead. The Schlieffen Plan had likewise suffered a fatal blow, and the Marne proved to be the high water mark of the German advance. There would be no triumphal march into Paris. German dreams of a rapid victory proved to be a chimera. The logistical issues attending the German advance ultimately proved insurmountable. By the eve of the Battle of the Marne the distances between some supply railheads and the front lines of the German juggernaut extended over a hundred miles. At the same time, French and British troops were called upon to stand firm. Joseph Joffre, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, urged his men to hold at all costs and “die where they stand rather than give way.”⁸ Many grasped the urgency of the plea and took those words to heart. One French captain was killed leading his men against a deadly hail of German machine gun fire. His lieutenant then fell as he led the men forward, and a desperate cry arose that “the lieutenant is killed, the lieutenant is killed.” The mortally wounded officer, sensing the panic that was about to ensue, struggled to rise to his knees to shout: “Yes, the lieutenant has been killed, but keep on firm!”⁹ Such actions as those helped turn the tide, and the Germans began to fall back across the ravaged French countryside, giving up much of what had been won in the war’s opening weeks. Von Moltke was removed from his post on September 14. By December, the British and French victory had taken on a deeper religious or spiritual significance and had been defined by the term “the miracle on the Marne.”¹⁰

By the fall of 1914, once the German advance had been halted, the exhausted belligerents all understood that the only way to survive was to entrench. Long lines of deep trenches began to stretch across Western Europe with the British holding an area extending southward from Ypres to the Somme River. Trench systems typically consisted of three lines: the forward line, a support line, and a reserve line. In order to reduce the effect of explosions or of being enfiladed, none of the trenches ran in straight lines. Instead, they were cut in a short traverse pattern with each leg running at right angles to the next. The trenches were soon waterlogged and with no way to keep the men’s feet dry the common ailment known as “trench foot” began to take its toll. Rubber gumboots would not appear quickly enough or in sufficient numbers to prevent the misery that resulted from standing all day in soaked footwear, puttees, and even trousers, which froze solidly

at night as shivering soldiers huddled low in their muddy holes. Everything was mud-caked and sodden. Lice were rampant. Greatcoats caked with mud and soaked with water doubled in weight. In heavy rains, water sometimes rose to waist level. Periodically the men withdrew from lines so they could recuperate briefly before starting the process again. Such were the shared afflictions of the men who filled the trenches on both sides as the first Christmas of the war drew near. The horrors of poison gas would not appear until the next spring, and despite the desperate fighting, random bombardment, and sniper fire, bitterness had not yet reached the depth where some brief recognition of the humanity of the foe could not be acknowledged.¹¹

While many British soldiers at the front, supported by the fervent hopes of their loved ones at home, would have welcomed a respite from the incessant fighting, news articles discussing the prospect of a truce often appeared side-by-side with articles designed to inspire determination to prevail against the dastardly foe. During the holiday season there was no break in that aspect of the propaganda war that hoped to stir British patriotism, boost enlistments, and engender hatred for the ‘Hun.’ A poem dated December 26 appeared in a London newspaper, marking a distinct turn from the celebration of the birth of the Christ child. Instead, it castigated the German Kaiser and his minions starting with its title “The Baby Killers.” Unfortunately, propaganda and good poetry, at least in this case, were not synonymous.

Oh, William, dear, now did you hear
The news that’s going round?
That in your troops and navy men,
A loving lot you’ve found.
On land their “Kultur” they have shown,
On sea they’ve done the same,
By slaughtering poor innocents
They have earned immortal fame.
And now they drink unto Der Tag,
And proudly wave their dirtied flag,
These brave sons of Attila’s,
But Christians throughout the world,
Know them as “baby killers.”¹²

Likewise, in many places along the front and elsewhere the spirit of the season did not apply. Nothing but hard fighting and misery marked the days leading to Christmas. In Belgium and northern France, frost and mist on December 25

struggled to produce a Christmas-like scene, but the thunder of artillery along the Yser River early that morning quickly disappointed those who harbored hopes for a truce. Belgian troops crossed the river that day and pushed the Germans back from their trenches. It is likely that some of those Belgians may have enjoyed the Christmas gift from their king, Albert I, who had announced a few days before that he was providing each man a box of twenty-five cigars bearing the inscription “Yser, 1914.” It seems equally likely that there was an abundance of unused cigars after the battle had taken its bloody toll. In all, it was a poor Christmas in Flanders, with one British correspondent there noting on December 24 that the troops were less fortunate than their comrades on other fronts. “The Belgian soldiers, the heroes of Liege and the Yser,” he wrote, “lack all but the bare necessities.”¹³

Christmas Day also saw British naval seaplanes attacking German warships sheltering near their base at Cuxhaven on the North Sea. German Zeppelins and other aircraft quickly responded. British ships standing off the coast drove them away and picked up several downed Royal Navy flyers. A contemporary newspaper account indicates that one pilot was lost and at least six others were rescued, yet the exploit was described in glowing terms in that paper as “a new chapter in naval warfare,” with the repulse of the German airships seeming especially noteworthy. “The fight between our [ships] and the two German Zeppelins reads like a page of fiction from [H.G.] Wells translated into fact” wrote an enthusiastic reporter.¹⁴ Others took a more balanced view, observing that the “episodes are minor details of the war,” but acknowledging at the same time that if they drew the “German fleet, aerial or marine” into battle, “the men that undertook them will have played their part.”¹⁵

German air raids on Britain were causing equal consternation, but civilians at that time seemed still to be taking it with traditional English aplomb, particularly near the holidays. After being advised to purchase insurance against “war risks,” one concerned citizen expressed amazement at the possibility that the war should reach across the seas to endanger his London home. “Never in my most inspired moments did I imagine that I should have to insure a peaceful retreat in the sylvan heart of old Marylebone forest against the risk of Zeppelin bombs, howitzers, ‘Jack Johnsons,’ and petrol pranks of the Potsdam pests.”¹⁶ London’s *Globe* newspaper even printed light-hearted limericks concerning air raids:

An enemy aerial rover
Thought he'd drop us a missive at Dover,
But the list of the dead
Was but one ca'bage-head
So he needn't have fagged to come over.¹⁷

While some of their kinsmen at the front would celebrate a cautious Christmas with their adversaries, the mood at home was a muted one. "London during these last two or three days seems to have been darker than ever it was before," wrote one observer.¹⁸ Closed shops and only sporadically glowing streetlights increased the sense of gloom, yet glimmers of patriotic fervor showed in some places. Others, however, were reminded of the horrid costs of war. A dress rehearsal for a performance at Drury Lane, a West End theater, saw nearly a thousand wounded soldiers clad in red and blue hospital garb topped by khaki great coats crowded into the seats. Many bore the hideous scars of battle, while others were just starting to recover from their wounds. Still, they were mostly cheerful despite their woes. Men with only one arm helped comrades with none, lighting cigarettes and helping them to refreshments. One reporter observing those scenes was moved to write that he now appreciated what the officers meant "when they say so often, 'the men are splendid.'"¹⁹ As the soldiers departed the theater to be driven away "by a magnificent fleet of Red Cross motor ambulances," a large and solicitous crowd "alternately cheered and held its breath, and occasionally sobbed a little." For their part, the soldiers cheered and sang the familiar music hall classic that defined their war: "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary."²⁰

Those were the luckiest of the wounded. Many more young Britons, Belgians, and Frenchmen lay immobilized or in agonizing pain in hospitals around the country. In London, layers of straw were laid on streets near hospitals in order to muffle the clopping of horses' hoofs and the churning of carriage wheels. Londoners were admonished to be mindful of the wounded, and instead of Christmas garland, hospitals were festooned with banners beseeching quiet. Again, those too were the luckiest of men. As Christmas drew near, Britons had to face the awful fact that a third of the original British Expeditionary Force fielded that summer now lay dead. By the end of the first year of war, 90,000 British soldiers were counted among the dead and wounded. That butcher's bill would be paid for almost another four years.²¹

Support for the wounded and for their families became an important concern. Many charitable organizations and relief societies received funding

directly from average Britons who purchased postcards sold at the behest of the Prince of Wales to generate income for a National Relief Fund. Hugely successful through the war's opening months, by November 1914 it was announced that a new fund-raising effort would be unveiled for the Christmas holiday: a National Christmas Card. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* reported on November 14 that the King had received the first copy of the new card.²² It was khaki colored and the front cover was illustrated with soldiers, ships, and aircraft in a picture entitled "Defenders of the Empire." Inside was a depiction of a dreadnaught battleship saluting Lord Nelson's ship, *HMS Victory*, and an inscription from the King himself: "Once again the sure shield of Britain and her Empire." A Shakespeare quote from *Antony and Cleopatra*, though somewhat out of context, capped off the text of the card with a further inspirational message: "What's brave, what's noble, let's do it." Such efforts raised thousands of pounds and did much to support those at home as well as the troops in the field.²³

Some British units produced their own Christmas cards or postcards to send home, which the men sometimes referred to as "field service cards." One private wrote to his cousin in Newcastle that he should not think of the card as "a lazy way of getting out of letter writing, for it is not always possible to write a long letter."²⁴ Though not common, the postcards saw wide use in the British IV Corps. Their Corps commander, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Rawlinson, drew the artwork for some of the cards, and they were distributed to the men for their use in writing Christmas greetings to loved ones at home.²⁵

The Christmas holiday was traditionally marked on both sides by the exchange of gifts, or in some cases simply the giving of gifts. British soldiers at the front were to receive from their grateful nation a small brass gift box. Reputedly the idea of young Princess Mary, who lent her name to a public fund for the purpose, British and colonial troops of the Empire eventually received more than 426,000 of the brass tins embossed with her likeness. The words "Christmas 1914" appeared below her portrait and "Imperium Britannicum" above. Around the edges of the top were the names of the allied nations situated between depictions of weaponry, ships, and flags. The gift boxes were filled with a variety of items depending on whether the intended recipient was a smoker, a non-smoker, a nurse, or an Indian Sikh or Hindu. Men could receive a pipe, tobacco, cigarettes, candies, or writing materials. Some boxes included a unique sterling silver bullet pencil encased in a .303 caliber brass cartridge. Nurses were favored with chocolates. All the boxes contained a

Christmas card and a picture of the seventeen-year-old daughter of King George and Queen Mary. A surviving specimen housed in the collection of Australia's Museum Victoria measures roughly 3¼ x 5 inches. The boxes were so well received that many men thoughtfully re-wrapped them and sent them home to loved ones to be preserved as remembrances of the war. One corporal wrote home in January that he had "cards from the King and Queen and a present from Princess Mary; all these I shall treasure."²⁶ Another sent home the Christmas card he received from the King, "and I want you to keep it for me until I come home, which I hope to have the luck to do."²⁷ The pleasure that such a small gesture brought to the troops was inestimable. "During the afternoon we had our greatest pleasure of all," wrote a sergeant. "This was a lovely card from their Majesties the King and Queen wishing us a happy Christmas and a safe return. These, of course, we shall always treasure."²⁸ Another soldier who received "Princess Mary's Box" on December 26 pronounced it simply, "very nice."²⁹ A field artilleryman noted that he too received the Princess' gift, but it failed to accomplish its purpose. He complained that he "had a miserable time of it at Christmas," and other than the box, "the only way we knew it was Christmas was we got a piece of pudding."³⁰

The sentiments expressed in a later wartime poem entitled "The Christmas Box" accurately captured Princess Mary's recognition of the anguish of that first Christmas in the field and her wish to ease the burden on her countrymen far from home:

Oh, we have shipped his Christmas box with ribbons red 'tis tied,
And he shall find the things he likes from them he loves inside,
But he must miss the kisses true and all the laughter gay
And he must miss the smiles of home upon his Christmas Day.³¹

Though her gift was undoubtedly much appreciated, her kindness did not stop the cheeky editor of the *Liverpool Daily Post* from printing her photograph on October 30 with the caption: "Princess Mary, Christmas Fairy."³²

The Crown Prince of Germany likewise wished his soldiers "God's richest blessing" and provided his "faithful comrades in arms" with a useful gift of a smoking pipe that bore his image.³³ One British soldier who later took part in the fraternization during the informal Christmas Truce saw one of his Saxon foes standing quietly and smoking a large meerschaum pipe that "bore the face and high-peaked cap of 'Little Willie' painted on it." Seeing the Tommy looking at his pipe, the Saxon took it from his mouth and "said with quiet satisfaction:

‘Kronprinz! Prächtiger Kerl!’ before putting back the mouthpiece carefully between his teeth.” Someone later told him that Prächtiger Kerl translated roughly as “Good Chap.”³⁴

Among the soldiers themselves, the gift-giving spirit surfaced with the sudden cessation of firing in some areas along the front, and men scrambled to find small tokens to exchange with their new acquaintances from the opposing trenches. A corporal from the 2nd Northampton regiment wrote to his family on December 27 that on Christmas Day the Germans “even came over to our trenches and gave us cigars and cigarettes and chocolate and of course we gave them things in return.” Another private from the 1st Leicester regiment reported that they exchanged “tins of jam for cigars.”³⁵ It seems unlikely that hopes for a truce could have realistically encompassed an actual meeting of the combatants and the laying down of arms in honor of the season. Many of the men expressed their utter amazement that such a thing could happen.

Where eatables were not handy, the men found even simpler gifts to exchange. One private wrote that he “got one’s autograph and he got mine, and I exchanged a button with another, and exchanged cigs and got cigars galore.”³⁶ A sergeant major of the 6th Cheshire Territorials observed that “they greatly admired our equipment and wanted to exchange jack knives and other articles.”³⁷ A private of the Seaforth Highlanders recalled getting “cigars, cigarettes, and all sorts of presents” from the Germans. “They think the British a very brave lot and fairly gave us a good clapping on the back.”³⁸

In some cases even officers were involved in the gift exchanges. A lance corporal of the Berks regiment and a sapper who accompanied him received cigarettes and cigars from three German officers. They were also offered a drink, but the wary sapper insisted that the German officers drink first from the bottle. The lance corporal exchanged “a tin of bully” (corned beef) for a can of pears.³⁹ One field artillery officer recalled visiting the trenches on Christmas morning and being “staggered to find the Germans and English all crowded up together.” He couldn’t resist joining them. “It absolutely beat cock fighting,” he wrote ecstatically. “Tommy Atkins was swopping [sic] Woodbines for rank cigars and talking a desperate lingo of Cockney French and pidgin English.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, at home, some families were not entirely left to their own devices to supply gifts. Men of the Hull City Police Force, for example, provided gifts for their members then serving at the front. The gift parcels consisted of

cigarettes, a Christmas card and letter from the police superintendent, and a “sleeping helmet,” which resembled a woolen Balaclava. The policemen also made a gift of tea to the wives of the soldiers and provided small toys for the children.⁴¹

One group of over 1,500 British officers and men of the First Royal Naval Brigade fared especially well on Christmas. Sent to assist with the defense of Antwerp, the men were interned when that city finally succumbed in October. Cut off from retreat, their commander had wisely led them across the border into neutral Holland. Held at Groningen, the naval men received packages nearly every day in the week leading to Christmas. Along with wagons laden with parcels arriving three or four times a day, the grateful mariners were pleased to receive several thousand letters. Local Dutch performers sang a Christmas Eve concert in English. The following day the dining hall was bedecked with holly and mistletoe. A large Christmas tree with lights and presents and the music of one of the battalion bands also helped set the tone. A veritable feast of turkey with trimmings and English Christmas pudding for dessert crowned the special day. They were among a fortunate few to celebrate in such conditions that year.⁴²

Many others had a relatively peaceful day on Christmas, with tales of an abundance of plum pudding and a flood of parcels from home. “During the last few days,” wrote one correspondent, “many men had five or six to themselves.” The general consensus was that the men had spent their Christmas “very merrily.”⁴³

For many others, the day passed with little notice or fanfare. “You ask how I spent my Christmas,” wrote a private of the Northumberland Fusiliers. “Well,” he said sullenly, “it was just like any ordinary day. We had a small portion of Christmas pudding and that was all. . . . Time and again I have no idea what day it is. It is a very trying life while one has it and one never knows when it might be lost.”⁴⁴ One forlorn private wrote his mother that he “got some bully beef on Christmas Day, and nothing else except a biscuit.”⁴⁵ Some men even tried to discredit talk of the informal truce, apparently having not experienced anything of the sort on their part of the line. “You don’t want to believe half what is being said about concerts going on between the Allies and the Germans,” wrote one. “It is all lies. We had a very rough time of it for several weeks.”⁴⁶

Among those in the trenches who paid little heed to the holiday season was twice wounded Corporal J. Chisholm, who made light of the whole idea of Christmas boxes and exchanges of gifts:

I was in the trenches and we sent the Germans their Christmas boxes and New Year Gifts. I have never given so many New Year gifts and Christmas Boxes as I have done this year. They came over to our trenches for them, and they got them—more than they could carry. Then they wanted to go back and some of them got back. The ones that did get back got their New Year gifts as well as those who remained. They won't come out now they have had plenty of English Christmas boxes. They are so close to us that we have been throwing tins of bully beef at them and they pop their heads up to get the tins we pop them off.⁴⁷

In many places, as with Corporal Chisholm's area of the front, fighting never ceased. A lance corporal of the Coldstream Guards wrote his wife of the brave deed he witnessed on Christmas Day:

There was a British soldier out near the German lines wounded. He was lying there for two nights and two days in the rain and snow—and he was shouting for his regiment. I asked a Corporal to come out with me to fetch him in but we saw an Indian officer rush out to the man. Just as he was going to put the man on his back, a German fired and hit the officer. One of the privates in the same regiment ran out and got one on his back and the other in his arms and carried them to safety. I think it was the best bit of work I ever saw.⁴⁸

In some cases, the fighting was punctuated by temporary spells of holiday recognition. An Englishman serving in the French Foreign Legion recalled a brief Christmas morning songfest. His French compatriots loudly sang the “Marseillaise,” at dawn, which was soon answered by “Watch on the Rhine” wafting across the field from the German trenches. “That died down to the sterner music of volley answering volley, and I emptied my magazine of eight cartridges in that strange concert; but that Christmas was, as if by consent, comparatively free from firing.”⁴⁹ A corporal of the 8th Royal Scots Territorial Regiment also noted a brief respite on Christmas morning that was marked by banter but no close contact. “Somehow or other a friendly feeling got up between the Germans and us,” recalled the Scotsman, “so we both left our trenches unarmed and exchanged greetings about 300 yards apart. We were all standing in the open for about two hours, waving to each other and shouting, and not one shot was fired from either side. . . . After dinner we were firing and dodging as hard as ever; one could hardly believe that such a thing had taken place.”⁵⁰

Others did no fighting, but still were unable to engage in the sorts of fraternization that marked some areas of the front. One French soldier wrote wistfully to his mother on Christmas morning filled with the spirit of the season despite the dreary conditions of his existence. He occupied an outpost close to the German lines where he and his comrades were “obliged to show no sign of life, so as to conceal our presence from the enemy.” Despite that, he seemed to have been fully in the melancholy grip of the season:

What a unique night!—night without parallel, in which beauty has triumphed, in which mankind, notwithstanding their delirium of slaughter, have proved the reality of their conscience.

During the intermittent bombardments a song has never ceased to rise from the whole line.

Opposite to us a most beautiful tenor was declaiming the enemy's Christmas. Much farther off, beyond the ridges, where our lines begin again, the *Marseillaise* replied. The marvelous night lavished on us her stars and meteors. Hymns, hymns, from end to end. It was the eternal longing for harmony, the indomitable claim for order and beauty and concord.

As for me, I cherished old memories in meditating on the sweetness of the Childhood of Christ. . . . I thought of all happinesses bestowed; I thought that you were perhaps at this moment calling down a blessing upon my abode. The sky was so lovely that it seemed to smile favorably upon all petition; but what I want strength to ask for perpetually is consistent wisdom—wisdom which, human though it may be, is none the less safe from anything that may assail it.⁵²

Whether he got his wish is unknown, for within four months the unfortunate Frenchman went missing at the Argonne.

In areas where actual fraternization and gift exchanges took place, it seems the German troops generally initiated the contact. It seems incredible, especially in light of the terrible toll of death and destruction they had seen for the last four months, that one would have the audacity to poke one's head dangerously above the ramparts to test whether the other side was serious about not firing. Yet they did so on numerous occasions, for the most part taking one another's word honorably. The effect was unique to that war and would never be repeated. Frequently the appearance of German Christmas trees or singing helped to break the ice.

In some cases, the firing simply petered out on Christmas Eve, and astonished soldiers heard the Germans “shouting across to us, ‘a happy Christmas.’” Soon, Christmas trees “with hundreds of candles” were placed “on the parapets of their trenches.”⁵³ A sergeant in the 3rd Rifle Brigade was writing in his dug-out when his “chum came bursting in upon me with: ‘Bob! Hark at ‘em!’ And I listened. From the German trenches came the sound of music and singing. . . . ‘They’ve got Christmas trees all along the top of their trenches,’” his friend reported. The sergeant climbed up for a look and “saw a sight I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole of their line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description, many of them in such positions as to suggest that they were hung upon Christmas trees.”⁵⁴ Another young officer wrote that on Christmas Eve the German trenches “were a blaze of Christmas trees, and our sentries were regaled for hours with the traditional Christmas songs of the Fatherland.” When they met in No Man’s Land the next day, the German officers “even expressed some annoyance . . . that some of these trees had been fired on, insisting they were part almost of a sacred rite.”⁵⁵ In other areas where trees were not available the men noted that the Germans “had their trenches all lit up with big bonfires and lanterns.”⁵⁶

In many areas the singing of Christmas Carols, or even bawdy soldiers’ ballads on the part of some suspicious British regiments, provided the means to advance the personal meetings on the field. A Belgian soldier recalled a Christmas Eve “of imperishable beauty. At midnight, a baritone stood up and in a rich resonant voice sang, ‘Minuit Chrétiens.’ The cannonade ceased and when the hymn finished applause broke out from our side and from the German trenches!” Whether or not they comprehended the French lyrics, German and Englishman alike would have recognized the tune of “Oh Holy Night.” Singing and celebrating could likewise be heard from the German side, and the following morning the Belgians were astonished to see a placard displayed over the German trenches wishing them all a Happy Christmas. An even more astounding event occurred when the Germans left their trenches and “unarmed they advanced towards us singing and shouting ‘comrades!’”⁵⁷

A Cheshire sergeant major reported that on Christmas Eve the Germans fired flares, and “as each fireball went up . . . our men shouted ‘Hurrah’ and ‘Let’s have another.’” The men also sang “Christians, Awake!” and other hymns to mark the occasion.⁵⁸ Another soldier “stood in wonder” as “a rousing song came over

us—*The Watch on the Rhine*. Our boys answered with a cheer, while a neighboring regiment sang lustily the *National Anthem*.” The singing opened the door for two small parties of combatants to meet between the lines, lit by a German searchlight. Afterwards the men sang through the night, serenading one another in turn. “‘Give us Tipperary,’ [the Germans] cried. Whereupon an adjacent Irish regiment let loose a tremendous ‘whoop,’ and complied with the request in a way as only Irishmen can.”⁵⁹ A Londoner in the trenches experienced a similar incident that included exchanges of songs. At around 2:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, he noted, “a German band came out of the trenches and played carols, ‘Home Sweet Home,’ etc. It was wonderful to hear.”⁶⁰ A rifleman of the Queen’s Westminsters recalled the men singing to one another, and one German even played “God Save the King,” on a mouth organ. Again, the overtures led to a total relaxation of discipline. Exploring some ruined houses in rear of their lines, the Westminsters found “old bicycles, top hats, straw hats, umbrellas, etc. We dressed ourselves up in these and went over to the Germans. It seemed so comical to see fellows walking about in top hats with umbrellas up. Some rode the bicycles backwards. We had some fine sport and made the Germans laugh.”⁶¹

In many cases, the informal truce was couched in semi-official terms with agreements to allow time to bury the dead that lay in the No Man’s Land between the trenches. A Scotsman recalled having a “short service over the graves, conducted by our minister and the German one. They read the 23rd Psalm and had a short prayer. I don’t think I will ever forget the Christmas Day I spent in the trenches.”⁶² In some places the dead were numerous and had lain in the open for a week. “It was a ghastly sight,” recalled one soldier as he watched the digging parties laboriously hacking away at the frozen ground to create two common graves. Once the work was completed, “the German officers remained to pay their tribute of respect while our chaplain read a short service. It was one of the most impressive things I have ever witnessed,” he wrote. “Friend and foe stood side by side, bare-headed, watching the tall, grave figure of the padre outlined against the frosty landscape as he blessed the poor broken bodies at his feet. Then with more formal salutes we turned and made our way back to our respective ruts.”⁶³

Though the work of burying the dead was gruesome business and hard labor, the men were undoubtedly glad to do it. In places, the trenches were as little as twenty-five yards apart, with the space sometimes filled with dead bodies. One soldier recalled helping to bury a number of German dead where the lines were so

closely situated that the area was known as “The Death Trap.” It had proved so for a number of hapless German attackers. “We could see the dead Germans half-buried, their legs and gloved hands sticking out of the ground.”⁶⁴ In some cases the dead numbered in the hundreds, many lying exposed for a week or more, so the truce, if only for burial of the slain, was welcome at least on that account. A Londoner, repulsed by the sight of the many decaying bodies, welcomed the opportunity to remove them, noting also that the Germans “were good enough to bring our dead out of some ruined houses by their trenches so that we could give them burial here. I personally, shall be very pleased, when we go up tomorrow night not to have the sight before us again.”⁶⁵

For the Germans, withdrawal from their previous line of attack meant that many graves were now behind the Allied lines. A former Bolton postman described how a German officer requested permission to visit the grave of a fallen comrade, then situated far behind the British lines. He was led blindfolded to the gravesite where he stayed a little while before being led back to his own lines.⁶⁶

A few men were fortunate to be able to attend religious services that Christmas. One Gateshead soldier wrote to a friend about having had “Communion this morning in a farm about a half-mile away.” He must have been posted in or very near the front lines, for he recalled that he “set off before daylight to be on the safe side. . . . The farm had been bombarded and consequently it was in a bad way. Where we held the service half the roof was off. I don’t suppose I shall ever go to such another service—it was so reverent and the surroundings so rough.”⁶⁷ Other services were held in No Man’s Land amid the detritus of war. A British chaplain from Aberdeen held both a burial service as well as a Christmas service between the lines, “his hearers comprising German as well as British soldiers. . . . After the service a German officer presented the clergyman with a cigar.”⁶⁸

The burial details were not just occasions for solemn services. There was much talk between the opposing combatants, and in one case the meeting of German and Scotsmen degenerated into a friendly free-for-all with the sudden appearance of a rabbit on the field. “Instantly, with the greatest good humour, friend and foe alike joined in a frolicsome chase. They tumbled and pulled each other about, and of course in the midst of all this hilarity Master Hare quietly escaped.”⁶⁹

Many of the British accounts attribute the friendliness of the Germans to the fact that they were Saxons or Bavarians, not more rigid and warlike Prussians. One Leicester soldier complimented the Germans as being “a decent lot of fellows in

front of us now—Saxons; they don't like the Prussian Guards.”⁷⁰ Another man noted after meeting and exchanging gifts with his German foe that he had “heard that this happened all along the British line excepting where the Prussians were opposed to it.”⁷¹ Still another wrote his sister from Belgium that those he met were also Saxons. “It would have been a different tale with the Prussians,” he told her.⁷² There was apparently some danger whenever Prussian forces were on the line. One soldier wrote that there were two German regiments in front of him, a Saxon regiment and one of Prussian Guards. An agreement was reached on Christmas morning with the Saxons, but when the British came out of their trenches as agreed, the neighboring Prussians fired on them killing two and wounding several others. Still they persisted in the effort. The Saxons threatened the Prussians if they fired again, and eventually the British and Saxons met halfway. “They were continually falling out with the Prussians,” he said. “They are the people who are the cause of the war. They hate the English very much indeed.”⁷³ A Medical Corps officer also noted a failed attempt to celebrate Christmas on his part of the front. Some British soldiers left their trench and went towards the German lines, “but the enemy—now thought to be Prussians—told them to go back and fired on them before they had regained their trenches.”⁷⁴ A lance corporal of the North Staffordshire regiment met with the more friendly Saxons opposite his lines, whom he claimed apologized for having to fight the English. Saxons “as you know, are more English than German,” he wrote. “It is the Prussians and the Uhlans that are doing the damage. These men in our front are like gentlemen; they would not shoot at us.”⁷⁵ Yet another soldier described the Germans in his front as “quite a decent lot,” and noted that several of them had “lived in London and were in business in the city, and one of them found that he went up to the city in the same train as one of our fellows. Another lived in Finchley and so on.”⁷⁶

The British soon found they had much in common with those of the enemy they met. Many spoke English and had indeed lived in England before the war. One corporal of the 6th Gordons even had a shave from a German soldier who had been a barber in Southampton.⁷⁷ After an exchange of cigars and newspapers with a German, a British soldier noted, “the chap could speak perfect English and he told us he had a wife and three children in Liverpool.” Another German begged an officer to “send his photograph to his sister, who lives in Liverpool.”⁷⁸ In some cases an interpreter was required, and after some struggles to communicate, one German regiment finally brought out a man who had lived in America for some time.⁷⁹ In

other cases the men spoke French, “since they could not talk our ‘lingo’ nor we theirs.”⁸⁰

The Tommies soon learned that the Germans were apparently not well acquainted with the current status of the war. “They all believed that London had been captured, and that German sentries were outside Buckingham Palace. They are evidently told a lot of rot. We gave them some of our newspapers to convince them.”⁸¹ A Warwickshire private met a German who had been employed for ten years as a waiter at the Grand Hotel Eastbourne who “said he wished he was back again. They have got the idea that they are winning so one of our fellows gave them the latest paper which will open their eyes.”⁸² Still, one thing that was frequently remarked upon by those encountering English-speaking Germans was the nearly universal sentiment that they were all quite fed up with the war.

Another commonality was a love of football. Reports of football matches taking place between German and British soldiers during the Christmas truce have grown to mythic proportions. In fact, most of the references in British letters from the period refer either to failed attempts to get up a game, or to British soldiers kicking a ball about in an impromptu manner outside their trenches. There are few if any documented references to an actual match between the combatants, and none from actual participants. Of those claiming a match took place, it is unclear as to whether they actually witnessed it or were repeating hearsay that might have been true or untrue. Undoubtedly, such tales would have spread through the trenches like an urban legend, yet the possibility exists that at least some play took place. The *Carlisle Journal* printed a letter from a man who had a friend who knew an officer in the Medical Corps who reported, “The regiment actually had a football match with the Germans who beat them 3-2.”⁸³ A Cheshire man told his friends at home that while fraternizing on Christmas Day, “The Scotsmen started the bagpipes, and we had a rare old jollification, which included football, in which the Germans took part.”⁸⁴ Such statements leave open to conjecture the question of whether a formal game took place, but it would seem that something happened that made it worth noting. In many cases, it was reported strictly as hearsay: “Elsewhere along the line I hear our fellows played the Germans at football on Christmas Day. Our own pet enemies remarked that they would like a game but as the ground in our part is all root crops and much cut up by ditches, and as . . . we had not got a football, we had to call it off.”⁸⁵ The lack of a football was a

deterrent to several well-intended challenges, but in at least one case a scheduled match for Boxing Day “was prevented by our superiors at HQ.”⁸⁶

Others wrote that some “tried to arrange a football match . . . but I don’t think that came off.”⁸⁷ Failed attempts are mentioned with some frequency. One soldier wrote his wife, “they wanted to arrange a football match with us but it got rather too late.”⁸⁸ Another admitted that the “Germans were very sporty and wanted to arrange a football match with us for Christmas afternoon which, however, when the time came fell through.”⁸⁹ An infantry colonel tried to arrange another truce for New Year’s Day so that a football game could be played between the lines. “They were very full of the football idea of mine,” he reported. “I said if they would like another armistice then I would turn out a team and play them among the shell holes, and they were quite keen. . . . I wonder if it will come off.”⁹⁰

Statements about games taking place between the British troops were more common. “In the afternoon there was a football match played beyond the trenches, right in full view of the enemy,” recalled one. “They kept the truce honorably.”⁹¹ A Scotsman similarly noted that “some of our fellows were playing football along the firing line—a rather curious affair after such revengeful attacks on one another.”⁹² A Warwickshire rifleman wrote his aunt that on Christmas day he and his mates played football between the two lines of trenches, “the Germans being interested spectators.”⁹³ For drivers in the field artillery, situated more safely behind the lines, the games were less worrisome. “We had three games of football, or I should call it mudlarking as there are very few fields around here that are not like a ploughed field; but never mind it does for us.”⁹⁴ In some cases, an early morning fog provided safety. “We could not see the German trenches,” a rifleman of the Westminsters reported, “and knowing that they could not see us we blew up the football and had a kick about behind the trenches, but the ground was too hard.”⁹⁵

Whether an actual game between Germans and Britons took place or not, the war-weary young men on the front lines in 1914 loved the sport, and any opportunity even to entertain the notion of a temporary return to sanity appealed to them greatly. It was generally agreed by all that they wished heartily for the war to be over. A Staffordshire private recalled, “One of them even suggested that we should finish it off at football or throwing mud at each other, as we should not get hurt.”⁹⁶

Unfortunately, such a friendly end to war could not be. The easy banter and camaraderie that marked the Christmas truce soon was nothing more than a distant memory. Many of those who took part would be numbered among the dead and wounded as the war progressed and simultaneously degenerated into an even more horrific bloodletting. Those who experienced Christmas 1914 on the front lines must have possessed at least some vague hopes that the war would be won in the spring. Perhaps there was hope that warm weather and dry ground would present new opportunities to get into the open and maneuver as armies were supposed to do. Perhaps there was hope for a negotiated settlement. In any event, whatever attitude the men held, it was not so hopeless as it would be in future years when the holidays would pass between the belligerents with hardly a suggestion of a truce and with little trace of the camaraderie that was exhibited in 1914. The steadily mounting butcher's bill must have been accompanied by an increasing bitterness that prevented any further friendly intercourse with the enemy. Thus, the Christmas Truce of 1914 stands as an anomaly in that war. It was a unique time when the men could still find in one another the things they held in common rather than those that kept them apart. The recently passed one hundredth anniversary of the truce should give us pause not only to remember those young men who suffered in France and Belgium in 1914, but also to remember them for what they were: fathers, sons, brothers, and friends. We can gain some appreciation for their humanity through their letters or diaries and begin to appreciate them not just as distant faces peering from black and white photographs, but as the cream of a generation's youth. They once lived and breathed, and they once fought a great war, a war to end all wars. Like all young men, they hoped to live. Of that hope, far too many were robbed. It is well that we remember them as we continue the commemoration of the centennial of the First World War.

Notes

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